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## A Search for the Oldest Grave in Johnson County

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THE original community centers in rural Johnson county were not trading centers, post offices, or churches. They were graveyards near a few isolated rustic homes containing a grave or two. Trading centers, post offices, churches, etc., were more or less established as a matter of personal choice. The selection of a graveyard was forced upon the early pioneers suddenly and unexpectedly.

The designation of the time and place of one's death is not a human prerogative. The early squatters and homesteaders reached Johnson county as a matter of personal choice. But often no sooner had they reached their new home until somebody died—a matter not of their own choosing. Often the victim was an innocent infant; sometimes it was an old hardened son of the west falling before the Silent Reaper immediately upon his arrival in his new home.

Perhaps these original settlers lived in their new environment for several years before there was registered much evidence of their presence. But seldom had they secured any substantial hold on the soil before there was a grave.

In those days of storm and stress, decisions relating to death and the disposition of the dead were postponed even more than today. Generally it was not until the tragedy occurred that any thought was given to a burial place. Then amid a cloud of gloom, despair, and frustration an important decision had to be made. Perhaps the deceased had died of some communicable disease—black diphtheria, for instance—and this decision had to be made immediately. The location of many of the earliest graveyards of this county must be the result of just such decisions. The wonder is not that many were so poorly located; the miracle is that not far more were eventually abandoned.

When a boy I was told the story of how Center cemetery and church originated. A child died. A snow storm came. The roads became blocked. Moving a funeral caravan through the drifts for eight miles was out of the question. Some one suggested: "We need a graveyard and church here." That was the origin of Center cemetery and church.

If the old people of Johnson county could all be interrogated I am sure such interviews would reveal many similar dramatic episodes. And there is little doubt that during the first few decades of Johnson county history a cemetery was begun in a community project including a church. Usually a church followed.

Few graveyards were opened in this county after about 1870. Only three have been started since 1900, an Amish cemetery in Sharon township in 1902, a Jewish cemetery north of Iowa City in 1918 and the latest one at Fairview. None of these cemeteries in 1920 now containing two graves.

Where is the oldest in Johnson county? It is not that of Dolly Swan in Iowa City, for John and Louise Tangle had already buried a son in the River Junction cemetery the year before. Perhaps the oldest authentic grave will never be located, it may no longer exist.

Besides there is some evidence that some early graves may represent reburials. This seems the logical conclusion in the case of the one represented in the accompanying picture. This tombstone appears in the Castek cemetery in Monroe township. The inscription is:

GEORGE W  
son of  
CHARLES F &  
Blanch  
LEONARD  
died  
Mar. 4 1834  
aged 8 yrs  
9 mo. 3 das

The next oldest stone in this cemetery is 1852. Probably this son was moved from some eastern cemetery.

The gateway to the Blain cemetery in Jefferson township has the

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